

Van Hollen Testimony at Maryland House of Delegates Judiciary Committee on House Bill 425

Thank you, Chair Clippinger. I want to thank the Judiciary Committee for allowing me to testify at today's hearing on common-sense gun control legislation to close the ghost gun loophole. I also want to thank my friends Delegate Lesley Lopez and Attorney General Brian Frosh for their leadership on this bill.

The Maryland General Assembly leads the nation in smart and effective gun reform. During my time in the Maryland Senate, we enacted legislation requiring all guns sold in our state to have built-in trigger locks. That law helped reduce accidental gun deaths, and it has been followed by other statutes outlawing assault weapons, limiting ammunition magazines, and enacting handgun licensing requirements. I know these have not been easy fights. But time and again, the men and women of the Maryland General Assembly have had the courage to stand up to the NRA and put the safety of our communities first.

But as technology changes, there is more work to do. One of the biggest challenges we now face is the "ghost gun" loophole.

Under current law, any Marylander can buy gun parts online and assemble those parts at home to make a working gun with minimal effort. But unlike guns that you buy from a gun shop, there's no requirement for a serial number on gun parts. These "ghost guns" are undetectable and untraceable. We're enforcing one set of rules for assembled guns and another set of rules for unassembled guns. That doesn't make a bit of sense.

This ludicrous loophole has dangerous consequences. Officers from the Baltimore Police Department seized 345 ghost guns last year. That number is expected to double in 2022. During a hearing before the United States Senate Judiciary Committee, Baltimore City Police Commissioner Michael Harrison testified that his department saw a 300 percent increase in the number of ghost guns seized in 2021 compared to 2020. Nearly one in four guns seized were from individuals too young to legally possess a gun. One individual was just 14 years old. Other jurisdictions across the state report similarly disturbing trends.

These statistics have serious implications. Marylanders witnessed the urgency of this issue just last month when a student at Magruder High School in Montgomery County allegedly shot a classmate with a ghost gun. The threat is real and the danger is here. We must act.

Senator Ben Cardin and I have urged the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives to close ghost gun loopholes nationwide. I'm also working with federal lawmakers to pass legislation that would subject manufacturers, distributors, sellers, and buyers of gun kits to the same federal regulations that govern completed firearms. The U.S. Department of Justice is taking additional action through a new National Ghost Gun Enforcement Initiative.

These are important steps, but we need a unified approach to address this crisis at all levels of government. The Maryland General Assembly has been on the leading edge of gun reform for decades. It's time to take up that mantle of leadership once again.

I urge the General Assembly to pass this common-sense legislation at the state level to close the ghost gun loophole. This bill will keep dangerous firearms away from those who seek to game the system. This bill will help reduce senseless gun violence, which has already taken a heavy toll on our communities. This bill will save lives.